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ABSTRACT

Using interviews in a longitudinal study can be a productive way to gain insights into various factors that play a part in how students view their experiences as they make transitions into a university and across various contexts for writing. During the first three semesters of a study, 312 interviews were conducted with students, beginning when they first entered the university. Analysis of transcripts of the interviews indicated that the students' experiences supported social constructivist theories of writing that suggest making meaning is a complex act of negotiation. Students weaved their past experiences together with their teachers' specific assignments, but that complex act was different for each student. Findings suggest three reasons why using intensive interviews over a period of time is beneficial are: (1) interviewing students over a period of time elicited data about students' sociocultural histories; (2) one interview session might not elicit as meaningful data as several interviews over time can; and (3) researchers can show their interpretations to the participants to elicit students' perspectives on the researcher's interpretations and speculations. (Contains eight references.) (RS)

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Using Interviews to Discover Students' Perceptions and Perplexities

by Deborah Brown

The possible limitations as well as the potential of interviewing as a method of data collection have been well documented as have the reasons why researchers who have investigated writers in particular settings have used interviewing to gather data. Two of the more common reasons have been to get retrospective accounts of the participants' composing processes (Herrington, 1985; Anson & Forsberg, 1990) and to verify other collected data (McCarthy, 1987).

More recently, however, researchers have used interviews to help investigate how various sociocultural factors may play a part in students' production of written texts. As Brandt (1992) argued, investigating cultural considerations that writers attend to as they compose might help us better understand the grounds for students' reasoning processes.

Interviewing students and collecting written documents have been the primary methods we have used to gather data for the longitudinal study that Dr. Flanigan and Dr. Thompson have already discussed. In this study, we have had the opportunity to ask students a wide variety of questions about their experiences and written texts, questions that include several of the types Patton (1980) described, including experience/behavior questions, opinion/value questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions,

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and background-demographic questions.

Because the data that I will discuss in this presentation were in the form of the students' own words (that is interview transcripts and written texts) and because I did not interview any of their instructors to get their perceptions of courses and writing assignments, this study is decidedly phenomenological with regard to the students' perceptions of their courses, their instructors, and their writing assignments. However, with Van Maanen's (1988) argument in mind that interpretive omnipotence is rarely "candidly or overtly claimed in realist tales" (p. 53), I should point out that my interpretations of the benefits of using intensive interviews in an on-going project like this are based on my own perspectives as a teacher as well as my perspectives as a researcher.

During the first three semesters of this study, I conducted 312 interviews which resulted in approximately 3,780 pages of interview transcripts. Needless to say, conducting the interviews and participating in this project have been a unique learning experience, and what I want to share with you are three reasons why I think using interviews in a longitudinal study is a productive way to gain insights into various factors that play a part in how college students' view their experiences as they make transitions into a university and across various contexts for writing. Also, I will conclude with a benefit the interviews provided for the students involved in this project.

First, interviewing students over a period of time elicited

important data about students' sociocultural histories. In particular, a significant interview session included asking a series of literacy autobiography questions that Deborah Brandt developed her own literacy research. Those questions elicited rich data that not only provided insights into the students' histories, but they played a significant role in helping me to make sense of much of what the students reported about their experiences. For example, when one white female student told me that all she could recall about writing in her early years of school was that she had to be put in a special class with a special teacher because she made a "D" in spelling, I was able to have a better understanding of why she had said at her initial interview that her least favorite subject was English and that she "was a terrible speller." Her concept of herself as a terrible speller was shaped in 2nd or 3rd grade, and she still viewed herself as a bad speller although she was a bright young woman attending college on an academic scholarship--majoring in math by the way!

The students' responses to the literacy autobiography questions were also helpful at times in making sense of some of the decisions students made with regard to topics they chose to write about and support they used for their arguments in their written texts. For example, one student wrote an argumentative research paper about transracial adoptions for her first semester composition course; the assignment required her to incorporate her own views with documented material. Iris [not her real name]

had struggled with other writing assignments during the semester, but she presented a well-written argument on the benefits of transracial adoptions. She reported that she gave a great deal of time and energy to the paper, and she was proud when she received an "A" for her final draft; it was the highest grade she received for a paper all semester. Her personal engagement with the topic made sense because of her own multi-ethnic heritage. She explained, "I feel that families should be able to adopt kids from different ethnic backgrounds because being brought up with an Italian dad and a Korean mom, I feel that I have acquired many good morals and characteristics."

Participating in the interview sessions and listening to what the students had to say with regard to their histories helped to make sense of why they said some of the things they said and why they viewed their experiences in the university the way they did and also reminded me of the importance of being sensitive to first-year college students' histories when we ask them to express their views about complex issues. For 17 of the 24 students I interviewed during their first year of college, writing papers that included their personal views was new to them, and sometimes it was a complex task when they had to incorporate their views with sensitive material. As Dunn (1993) argued, introducing students to material that may go against their personal values and cultural histories may cause them to put up barriers that prevent them from learning.

A second reason why using intensive interviews over a

period of time is beneficial is that one interview session might not elicit as meaningful data as several interviews over time can. We carefully prepared questions ahead of time in order to provide some structure to the interview sessions and to get answers to specific questions that the research team was interested in asking, but often the interviews were shaped by the students' own concerns when they came to my office. I will give one example to illustrate: one day [about half way through the first semester], a female student came to an interview directly from her composition class where she had just received an "F" for an essay exam. When she [Brenda] sat down in my office, she burst into tears. We talked about her essay exam a little while and then I asked her if she wanted to come back another time to do the interview because I was going to ask her questions about her general education courses that day, but she wanted to go ahead with the interview. One of the prepared questions was "Do you regret taking any of the general education courses you are taking this semester?" Her reply, not surprisingly was, "Well, I regret English right now; I hate saying that, but I do. I think she's the hardest teacher on the campus. She's just so stressful." Brenda used words like "psychotic" and "bizarre" that day to describe her composition instructor.

If the student had been interviewed only once, a researcher may have tended to think the students' mood caused her to give responses that were not the best indication of the students' perceptions; however, an examination of all the interviews with

Brenda over time indicated that her mood that day may have allowed her to be more honest and open about her perceptions than she would have otherwise. And at the first interview of the second semester when she was asked what her least favorite class was the first semester, she replied her composition class because she "didn't like the teacher at all." Interestingly, however, she also said that composition was the class she learned the most from the first semester: "I learned I could write about a lot of different things. In high school you don't get to write about a lot of diverse subjects. Even though I didn't do as well as I thought I would in there, I learned a lot." One interview with her would have left the impression that she was not learning anything at all in the course, but several interviews over time made it possible to gain a more clear picture of how and why she felt the way she did about her composition course.

A third significant aspect of interviewing students over a period of time is that a researcher can show her interpretations to the participants in order to elicit their perspectives on the researcher's interpretations and speculations; I found that doing so could verify interpretations and speculations as well as raise new interesting questions to investigate. For example, I recently completed my dissertation about three of the female students in the group of students I have worked with in this project, and one of the several interesting patterns revealed in the data was that all three students consistently said they did not like the peer revision sessions their instructors used in

their composition classes; they viewed the sessions as meaningless and pretty much ignored any suggestions their peers made about drafts of their papers. However, all three of the students consistently did seek feedback from people outside their composition classes as they worked on writing assignments. One of three students often talked to her family to generate ideas for her papers; two of the them went to the university's Writing Center to get feedback from the tutors there; at one time or another all three went to some of their instructors one-on-one outside of class, and two of them talked to friends, roommates, and sorority sisters; they also talked to me in the interview sessions about their writing.

Based on what the students reported in the interview sessions, I argued that it was evident that the peer revision sessions were not meaningful because they were artificial and teacher imposed. In fact one student commented that they were "just another assignment." Because I had not observed the peer revision sessions, I could not speculate as to why specific techniques did or did not work. However, based on all the data gathered over three semesters, I felt I could speculate about possible psychological and affective factors that contributed to why the peer revision sessions did not work for these three particular students and why they went instead to various people outside their classes. Then following suggestions by Miles & Huberman (1984), I shared some of the patterns and my speculations with the three students in order to elicit their

perceptions of the patterns and my speculations. For instance, one of several interesting patterns revealed in the data had to do with the gender of the instructors the students approached outside of their courses; for instance, one of the students, Anita, went to three female instructors when she needed clarification of an assignment or wanted the instructor to read a draft and give her some feedback, but she would not go talk to her ethics professor about an assignment and the ethics professor happened to be male. Another student, Nancy, only went to two male professors to ask questions about assignments. And the third student, Iris, went to one female composition instructor and to two male teaching assistants in her chemistry courses.

I do not have time here to go into all the reasons why that pattern was interesting but I will say that the three students represented three different ethnic backgrounds and came from three different states. A brief excerpt of one of the conversations I had [on the overhead] shows how those conversations in part verified my speculations about gender, but also raised interesting questions. [the overhead shows some of the students' response about why she would not talk to a male professor and shows that one of the reasons I had suggested that might have been a reason was incorrect]

This excerpt of an interview helps to point out that when students come to college they do not leave behind their histories; rather they exist within a historical context that plays a significant role in their college experiences.

Interviewing students over time, as we have learned in this project, can provide insights into a number of factors that play a part in how a student manages to produce a written linguistic text. Analysis of the data indicated that the students' experiences supported social constructivist theories of writing that suggest meaning making is a complex act of negotiation. Each student had, in varying degrees, some knowledge of general thinking and writing strategies that were applicable across disciplinary boundaries, but those strategies were not sufficient due to a number of historical and contextual factors (that there is not time to discuss today). The students somehow weaved their past experiences together with their teachers' specific assignments, but the complex act of intertwining threads of their past with new fabrics of their contexts was different for each one of them depending upon the threads they had to work with and the kind of materials they encountered, not only in particular courses, but in the larger university setting as well. Using interviews helped to gain important insights for teachers and researchers about a number of factors, but also benefited the students.

When the students entered the university they also entered this project, and participating in the project has provided the students with an opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences with someone they viewed as an interested collaborator in their learning experiences rather than an instructor who had the power to evaluate them. Although it would

be impossible to provide a mentor for all students to continually ask them questions like we do in this project, we do need to investigate ways to provide more opportunities for students to reflect upon what they are doing and learning. For example, at the last interview of the third semester, one question was "has the way you think about writing or feel about writing changed in anyway since you entered college?" One student's reply was, "No, I still don't like it." However, after a moment she said, "Well, a little bit, I guess, maybe it has changed a little [pause] in the way I think about it because the things that I write they are coming from me; they are coming from my perspective and knowing that, when I look at my paper and see what I wrote, you know, I think, 'this is what I think, this is me', and I never really thought about it that way before....[before] I would just want to get done."

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